

“Faith: It’s A Matter of Heart”

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Text: Mark 7:1-23

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I have a Jewish stove...or, at least, I have a stove that can convert to Judaism if I need it to. Perhaps you do too. My stove has a Sabbath mode setting that is intended to allow the appliance to be used by Jews during Sabbath and on Jewish holidays. The concern is the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy and not work on the Sabbath. Observance of the Law is central to the Jewish faith. But what counts as “work” on the Sabbath? Today, as in Jesus’ day, there is a body of teaching (which in our story is called the “traditions of the elders”) that helps define how to observe faithfully the 613 commandments found in the Hebrew scriptures. Think about that: for the orthodox Jew not only are there 613 commandments but there is body of directions to explain how the commandments are to be lived. Sabbath mode on my stove helps the observant Jew to “not work” on the Sabbath. When you open the oven door on the Sabbath the light doesn’t go on inside, because turning on the light would be work. Changing the temperature setting on the oven is also counted as work, so Sabbath mode can give you a delay between when you touch a button and the temperature changes. That’s just dealing with food preparation on the Sabbath with one appliance. Imagine the guidance given for the many, many other things that one might do on the Sabbath that could be counted as work...and that is just one law of 613.

The Pharisees in Jesus’ day did the same kind of theological work: providing guidance for how to live out the Law. And this makes complete, logical sense in their understanding of faith. For the Jews, faithfulness was understood substantially through obedience to the Law. So the Pharisees criticism of Jesus’ disciples is no surprise. They asked Jesus, “Why do your followers not wash their hands, according to the traditions of our elders?”

This is one passage of many in the Gospels that reflects a central teaching of Jesus about the essential nature of faith. For Jesus, faith is a matter of the heart. In Jesus’ teachings, God wants nothing less than our hearts, wants our hearts to change, wants us to express our good heart. When Jesus talked about heart he was talking about the very core of our being, our nature. This kind of language was so very different from that of the Pharisees. For the Pharisees, faith was about their laws that exist outside oneself and obedience to them. For Jesus, if we have what he called “the good heart” we will by our very nature live out the intentions of the Law.

Jesus saw the Pharisee’s approach to faith as one that had potential dangers inherent to it. He quoted Isaiah the prophet speaking as with God’s voice, “The people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Fruitlessly they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines” (vs 6-7). Jesus critique here is that the practice of faith in Jesus’ day could too easily lead people to stop short of God. Jesus’ point was that keeping one’s focus on following the traditions can mean one actually may not be attentive to God because one is being attentive to the Law.

This critique is one that spans the ages and is a helpful reminder to us even. 2,000 years ago or today, it is easy for any of us to get captured by the “traditions” of faith...captured by our habits of faith. Now, habits of faith are great to have—no question!—because they help us sustain our faith. But they can have an unhelpful side as well. What makes a habit a habit is that we do it unconsciously. It is the unconscious doing of the habit that can dullen our consciousness of God. Take something as simple as table grace for an example. We can say grace because it is our habit, but saying it one / two / three times a day, every day, can over time diminish the intended intimate moment of connection with God. It can become rote, not connection. The rote nature of table grace can also lead us to losing touch with the core meaning of that specific little prayer. We can easily forget the profoundness of God’s gift to us in the provision we receive daily through God’s creation: food. Grace is not something we perform for God in a prayer; rather, it is our recognition that we are benefactors of God’s abundant and unmerited grace. And so it can be for us as Jesus said in this encounter: we can honour God with our lips but our heart may not actually be engaged. But if we take our heart—our core self—into that simple prayer at mealtime the prayer can become a sacred moment of recognition, appreciation, gratitude, communion with God. It moves beyond something that is rote to being a matter of the heart.

This disconnect Jesus was talking about can also happen even here at worship. We understand that worship is to be like a sacrifice to God, and surely and truly it is. But if we see worship as only something we give to God, then our worship can become no different from Pharisees washing their hands, cups, and plates. Worship is a two-way street, making this a time God bathes us with abundant love and grace, a time when we can crave to know God’s presence, feeling the joy of knowing God, feeling sincere thankfulness that God forgives what we confess in prayer, being eager for deepening discipleship in response to our reflections on scripture. Having a heart for God moves us beyond what might become rote and moves us towards conscious practice. Which is what Jesus was essentially saying to the Pharisees that day about nature of lived faith: don’t let your consciousness of lived faith stop with the practices.

A good summary of this idea comes to us from one of the greatest theologians of all time—Augustine of Hippo. He wrote in the 5th century: “love God and do what you want!” Think about that for a moment: “love God and do whatever you want!” It is a very sneaky permission, because if you love God, what will you want to do? You will want to live like Jesus, and honour God in all you think, and say and do. You can’t do that by simply following rules—you need a changed heart. Jesus was getting at this in this encounter as well in the talk about being defiled. For the Pharisees, washing pots and cups and plates, preparing food properly, washing one’s hands before eating, all these practices were intended to maintain one’s spiritual purity. Jesus said in response, it is not what goes into our bodies that defiles us (that is, mars us, spoils us, degrades us); rather, it is what comes out of our hearts...out of our core essence. Here Jesus used a negative illustration saying that behaviours like theft, avarice, wickedness, deceit, envy and such can come from us because of our essential nature. Positively, Jesus summarized it like this (Matthew 12:35): “the good person out of the good treasure of the heart brings forth good”. For Jesus, this idea sums up the essence of lived faith. It affects how we relate to God (how we love God with all our heart) and how we relate to others (how we love our neighbor).

This raises a natural question for us as a faith community...and, really, is the question we were asking ourselves earlier this year. What is our essential nature, our DNA? In other words, what is our heart? Out of the work you did in the spring, the heart of this congregation can be summarized in one word: care. We see that care expressed deeply among ourselves, one to another. But Varsity today and in its heritage also expresses care well for neighbor. It's called "mission". Whether that neighbor is a Syrian refugee coming to Canada, or a person from down the street with dementia, or the victim of a natural disaster that we support through PWS&D, or the encouragement we give to residents at Longbow or families at Inn from the Cold, or people who pick up food boxes here, help we give to those learning English, or providing a place for some mentally challenged adults each week to fill a day with some small tasks around here...all these things and more are an expression of our good heart. We don't do these things because of a rule or a law, but because we empathize with those in need and respond in compassion. In other words we act out of the good treasure of our heart.

Given the work we did in the spring, it is our hunch that our future as a congregation lays in becoming a missional church. Missional congregations are churches that become more outwardly focused. They hear strongly the call to "love your neighbour", become more intentional in engaging people outside their congregation and seek to make a difference in the lives of those in need. There is no single template for what a missional congregation looks like so every missional church is truly unique. It really depends on the congregation's context (the local needs in the "neighbourhood", however that is defined) and what the congregation feels passionate about. As Dr. Darrell Guder told us last fall, the purpose of being a missional church is not only to express care but it is also to be a witness to Jesus Christ. A growing number of people in our society know little about Christianity and have little opportunity or desire to find out. Missional congregations live their faith visibly in front of these people by expressing Christian love in acts of caring. Our witness in this way may prompt some people to want to find out more about the faith we hold and find out more about us as a church. This is a kind of orientation that both our presbytery and The Presbyterian Church in Canada desires to see our congregations move towards.

It is our sense that this is where the heart of our church is. But for moving forward, we have to discover the kinds of needs "in our neighbourhood" that we can have a passion to help with. In other words, how much of a heart do we have for mission? To this end, the Session this week will be considering ways that will help us all to discover what mission can mean for us as VAPC. We will begin in 3 weeks time with an exercise we're calling "Who Is My Neighbour Walk." A lawyer asked this of Jesus and it's a good question for us to ask as well. It's a pretty simple exercise. We will gather Saturday morning at 9:30 (Sept. 22), we will ask you to form pairs, we will provide you with a map showing the location of a part of our neighbourhood we'd like to you just walk around: observing, learning, appreciating. We will also give you a handout describing things to look for. After walking around for about an hour or so we will reconvene back at the church to share our thoughts. The following week I will be starting a 5 week study on the nature of the missional church. We will use those five weeks to learn what generally a missional church looks like and also use the discussions to begin to imagine what VAPC might look like as a missional church. We hope to have as many participants as possible in these activities...and others that we will set up.

As the Buddha put it, "Your work is to discover your work and then with all your heart give yourself to it." And we can because God's desire is for us to have a good heart.